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e-Participation in Austria: Trends and Public Policies

**Georg Aichholzer
Doris Allhutter**

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Georg Aichholzer, Doris Allhutter

Keywords

e-participation, e-democracy, citizens' rights, institutional actors, public policies, government initiatives, evaluation

Abstract

The paper is a first step to assess the status of e-participation within the political system in Austria. It takes a top-down perspective focusing on the policy framework related to citizens' rights in the digital environment, the role of public participation and public policies on e-participation in Austria. The analysis of the development of e-participation in Austria as well as of social and political trends regarding civic participation in general and its electronic embedding, show a remarkable recent increase of e-participation projects and related initiatives. The paper identifies main institutional actors actively dealing with or promoting e-participation and reviews government initiatives as well as relevant policy documents specifically addressing and relating to e-participation or e-democracy. Finally, it takes a look at the state of the evaluation of e-participation. A major conclusion is that e-participation has become a subject of public policies in Austria; however, the recent upswing of supportive initiatives for public participation and e-participation goes together with ambivalent attitudes among politicians and administration towards e-participation.

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I Introduction

The notion of e-participation refers to “efforts to broaden and deepen political participation by enabling citizens to connect with one another and with their elected representatives and governments using Information and Communication Technologies” (Tambouris et al. 2006, 9). The aim of enhancing public engagement by offering electronic tools includes the vision that ICTs have the potential to reinvigorate democracy, to be a useful remedy against declining voter turnout and increasing disengagement of citizens from politics and political organisations. But first and foremost, as stated by the United Nations’ most recent e-government survey,

“E-Participation is one tool that enables governments to dialogue with their citizens. By enhancing government’s ability to request, receive and incorporate feedback from constituents, policy measures can be better tailored to meet the needs and priorities of citizens.”

(United Nations 2008, 58)

Masters et al. (2004) describe the role of technology in citizen engagement by the key words *e-enabling* referring to the function of technologies to provide access to relevant and useful information, *e-engaging* evoking the vision that a wider audience can be consulted and involved into deliberative processes via new technologies, and *e-empowering* which is understood to support active participation of citizens and their co-determination of political agendas. Generally speaking, e-participation and e-democracy denote initiatives implemented by institutional and administrative actors as well as political activities initiated by civil society. While research in e-participation strongly recognises the significant role played by civil society in promoting, designing, managing and aggregating e-participation initiatives, our paper takes a top-down perspective focusing on the policy framework related to citizens’ rights in the digital environment and public policies on e-participation.

This contribution is based on research undertaken within DEMO-net – the eParticipation Network of Excellence, funded by the European Commission under the Sixth Framework Programme.¹ The methods used for the empirical investigation include a review of the relevant literature and research reports, analysis of government documents and websites, complemented by personal communication with national experts in the field.

After a brief description of the actual state of e-participation in Austria section two outlines recent social and political trends regarding civic participation in general and its electronic embedding. Section three records main institutional actors promoting e-participation and gives a review of government initiatives and relevant policy documents specifically addressing and relating to e-participation or e-democracy. Finally, section four takes a look at the current state of the evaluation of e-participation initiatives and section five summarises some conclusions.

¹ See <http://www.demo-net.org/>.

2 The status of e-participation in Austria

During the past ten years, the Austrian government has made considerable efforts to modernise its public administration and other state institutions with an advanced information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure and online services. In a recent European benchmarking study Austria takes the lead in e-government both in terms of full online availability and online sophistication of basic services for citizens and businesses (Capgemini 2007). As regards Austria's e-government strategy as a whole, the focus has certainly been on administrative functions (Rupp 2004). Efforts were mainly concentrated on making the government machinery more efficient and online-service based, while policies and initiatives that aim at deploying electronic channels for public participation are still in their infancy.

As shown by Aichholzer and Spitzenberger (2004), online information services were the first to be implemented. Public information is essential for exerting citizen rights and enabling democratic participation, therefore these have some relevance for political involvement of civil society. In his study on e-democracy, Filzmaier (2003, 3) pointed out that the Federal Chancellery's e-government strategy had disregarded the electronic support of democratic processes and detected "still a lack of interactivity and of opportunities for political participation". The report includes disappointing results of interactivity tests by sending e-mails to political parties and members of parliament, underlining the fact that opportunities for online interactions with political parties were at a very low level at that point in time. In a more recent analysis also Fuchs (2006) found that e-mail practically remains the only online communication channel offered by national government and parliament.

Among the political parties merely the Green Party's website provides a blogportal and the Social Democratic Party invites to online discussions on issues such as the ongoing reform of the Austrian education system or ethics and religion as subjects in schools.² In contrast to parties other interest groups and issue based initiatives have discovered the advantages and used various forms of e-participation earlier. NGOs like Greenpeace Austria or Attack Austria offer tools like mailing lists, discussion boards, wikis, blogs and ePetitions. Filzmaier (2003, 12) notes that in early 2000 online platforms played a key role for organising civil protest movements against the coalition of the Conservative Party with the so-called Freedom Party. Since this time Austria also experienced various effects of negative campaigning (satirical e-cards, mail bombings, fake web sites). According to Mahrer and Krimmer (2005) there were still only a limited number of Austrian e-democracy examples, some of them initiated as local pilot projects by the academic sector. Currently, activities in the field of e-participation and experiments with pilot applications are significantly expanding. The number of existing e-participation services is still limited but the variety of projects and initiatives launched is observable.

Traditional media do not have an important role in the promotion of e-participation as information on online participation initiatives is rather poor. Nevertheless, the Austrian public broadcasting service ORF itself provides online fora for discussion on topics of public interest.³ Until recently, the role of the private sector in e-participation has largely been restricted to being a partner in the development of standards and applications and a contractor for specific competences (Bargmann 2006, 125pp.). Within the IT-sector an important part is being played by the Austrian Federal Computing Centre, a well established provider of e-government services. It offers solutions for e-participation and has initiated various pilot projects. As far as civic initiatives are concerned, the elec-

² See websites http://www.gruene.at/blog_portal/, <http://mitreden.spo.at/index.php?>

³ See website <http://futurezone.orf.at/>.

tion to the national parliament in September 2008 has triggered some new e-participation projects. Generally speaking, administrative and civil society initiators as well as academic researchers are the main driving forces in e-participation.

Despite the initial state of e-participation in Austria, significant steps taken at government level signal the turn to an advancement and a more strategic coordination of both offline and online citizen engagement. Three such initiatives deserve special mentioning: the *Democracy Initiative of the Austrian Federal Government* with the online platform “entscheidend-bist-du.at” (YOU are Decisive) launched in early 2008;⁴ the *Standards for Public Participation* elaborated by an inter-ministerial working group and adopted by the Council of Ministers in July 2008;⁵ and the implementation of a *Working Group on E-Democracy and E-Participation* within the Austrian Federal Chancellery in 2006.⁶

2.1 Direct democratic rights and political participation

A look at the institutional and legal frameworks can help to understand the role of public participation and the potential for e-participation in the Austrian political system. For those who are not familiar with its set-up it should suffice to outline some basic characteristics: Austria is a representative democracy⁷ with direct democratic elements. The Austrian constitution includes participation rights and provides for direct democratic procedures, namely petitions, referenda, and official opinion polls. Which legal regulations apply to a participation process depends on the actual case in question (Arbter et al. 2007, 13). Participation processes can take effect at the level of policies and legislation, in planning activities and program development and in concrete projects. Examples of Austrian acts and statutes that feature arrangements for public participation include trading regulations, the statute on water and waterways or the individual provinces’ statutes on land use.

In 2003, the so-called “Österreich-Konvent” (Austrian convention) was convened to decide upon a reform of the Austrian Federal Constitution.⁸ Propositions on extending plebiscitary components of political decision-making – like strengthening the position of citizens’ initiatives in referenda and official opinion polls – have been declined (Heindl 2005, 113) and the convention has failed to produce a proposal that would receive the two thirds of votes in the National Council necessary for constitutional amendments and reform. However, some important parts of the final report were generally agreed upon and are still expected to be implemented. According to the report to the

⁴ See website <http://www.entscheidend-bist-du.at/>.

⁵ See website http://www.partizipation.at/standards_oeb.html.

⁶ See website <http://reference.e-government.gv.at/E-Democracy.981.0.html>.

⁷ Legislative and executive powers are divided between the Federal Parliament and Government and the nine Provincial Parliaments and Governments. The head of state is the Federal President, who is directly elected for a six-year term. Executive power is held by the Federal Government, led by the Federal Chancellor, answerable to the National Council. The Federal Chancellor is appointed by the president and usually chosen from the leading party in the National Council. The Vice-Chancellor and Federal Ministers are chosen by the President on the advice of the Chancellor. The Austrian Parliament consists of two chambers. The National Council has 183 members who are elected for a legislation period of five years by a general election in which every citizen over 16 years (since 2007) is allowed to vote. The National Council is the dominant chamber in the formation of legislation. The Federal Council has 62 members who are elected by each of the provincial parliaments. It reviews legislation passed by the National Council and can delay but, generally, not veto its enactment.

⁸ The Austrian Constitution was adopted in 1920 and revised in 1929.

convention direct democratic rights were extended by reducing the minimum age for participating in referenda and public opinion polls to the age of 16 (Österreich-Konvent 2005). With respect to inclusion and legal equality Schaller (2002, 77pp.) stresses the need to extend the entitlement to vote as well as the right to participate in referenda, petitions and public opinion polls to a wider portion of Austrian residents. About nine percent of Austrian residents are excluded from the right to vote and to take part in direct democratic processes because they do not hold the Austrian citizenship (op. cit., 68pp.). Furthermore, people who have been convicted to a prison sentence of more than one year are not allowed to vote.

The actual extent and forms of public involvement of civil society in Austria have been researched in several studies (e.g. Plasser/Ulram 2002, 1999; Ulram 2000). Recently, a study describing the historical development of participation in Austria and comparing it with international data has been conducted by Walter and Rosenberger (2007). The authors look at the development of various forms of participation in Austria and differentiate between voter turnout, elite-directed activities⁹ and elite-challenging forms¹⁰ of participation. This classification “provides a differentiation between the affirmative, hierarchically structured, and representative elite-directed, and the confrontational, egalitarian, and self-determined elite challenging forms of political activity” (op. cit., 10).

In comparison to other Western European countries Austria records high turnout rates¹¹ and a huge proportion of party members relative to the electorate. Whereas it ranks among the top European countries regarding voter turnout and elite-directed activity, it shows comparatively low levels of elite-challenging activity. Walter and Rosenberger (op. cit., 18) come to the conclusion that “in Austria, hierarchical and institutionalized participation is traditionally more widespread than protest behaviour. This has to be seen as a major characteristic of the Austrian political culture, where political parties have played a comparatively strong role in both politics and society.”¹²

Nevertheless, Austria has been facing a decrease in voter turnout at all electoral levels (first and second order elections as well as European Parliament elections) and in elite-directed activities during the past 30 years (op. cit., 15pp.). In contrast, surveys diagnose a significant growth of activities in the area of elite-challenging participation (see box 1). Thus, Walter and Rosenberger (op. cit., 17) assume, “that there is less a decline of participation but rather a shift among different forms of political activity”.

⁹ Elite-directed activities are initiated by established organisations like political parties, labour unions, and so on. Examples are activities such as working in a political party or action group, donating money to political organisation or group, contacting politicians and/or government officials.

¹⁰ Elite-challenging activities, such as signing petitions, ethical consuming, attending lawful demonstrations and participating in illegal protest activities, give the public an increasingly important role in directly representing personal or community interests.

¹¹ Since the 1950ies, Austria’s average turnout level at national parliament elections comes in second (behind Belgium) with 90.2 percent (Walter/Rosenberger 2007, 17).

¹² Austria’s political system is characterised by a tradition of top-down political communication and consensus democracy with strong co-operation between major economic interest groups (like the Trade Union Federation, the Federal Economic Chamber, the Federal Chamber of Labour and the Chamber of Agriculture) and the government. This system of co-operation, commonly referred to as “social partnership”, is – although a voluntary arrangement – long-established in Austria’s political system. Among others, the social partners have the right to evaluate proposed legislation, to make recommendations to law-making bodies, and to draft texts for legislation directly related to the interests of the social partners (social welfare and labour law, etc.).

Table 1: Trends and changing patterns of political participation in Austria

Turnout (percent)	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	Net shift
National Parliament	95.3	93.8	92.3	91.6	83.6	81.4	-13.9
European Parliament	-	-	-	-	58.6	42.4	-16.2
<i>Percentage of people who report ...</i>							
Being a member of a political party	29	28	23	23	15	15	-14
Having signed a petition	-	-	34	48	46	55	+21
Taken part in a demonstration	-	-	6	10	10	16	+10

Source: extract from Walter/Rosenberger 2007, 16

Walter's and Rosenberger's analysis on socio-demographic factors influencing political activity shows that while education has no direct impact, it is nevertheless relevant for explaining participation. The impact of education on political activity is channelled through intervening variables like age, gender and immigrant background. They identify some effect of age, indicating that middle age groups are politically more active than young and elderly people, as well as "a weak but significant effect of German as the first language spoken at home" (op. cit., 26). Generally spoken, women report being less interested in politics and tend to think that they cannot change things through their engagement. But as studies (e.g., Inglehart/Norris 2003) suggest, this "disengagement of women mainly refers to a conventional notion of politics" (op. cit., 23). The study of Walter and Rosenberger however comes to the result that gender does not have a significant impact on political participation in Austria (op. cit., 27).

2.2 Current trends in e-participation

Using electronic means for political participation is contingent upon a range of social, cultural, economic, political and, last but not least, technological factors. The level of penetration with computers and Internet is just one important aspect. According to the Austrian Internet Monitor¹³ in the second quarter of 2008, a total of 78 percent of the Austrian population had access to the Internet and 61 percent of the Austrians above the age of 14 used the Internet intensively. About 30 percent of the Internet users are experienced in networking platforms. The EU's e-Government Benchmarking states that Austria was the first in the EU to achieve full online availability in 2007, meaning that each citizen or business has the possibility to access the examined services via a fully transactional electronic channel (Cappemini 2007, 29). In this respect Bargmann (2006, 123) critically notes that only the existence of service tools was checked but not their usage. The United Nations E-Government Survey 2008 also incorporates information about the demand side of "government to citizen" but nevertheless does not account for usage numbers.¹⁴ Amongst the UN member states Austria ranks 16th in the e-Government Readiness Index 2008 (United Nations 2008, 40). Regarding the percentage of individuals using the Internet for interacting with public authorities in the year 2007, 24.0 percent used it for obtaining information, 18.8 percent for downloading forms and 13.3 percent for returning completed forms to authorities (eGovernment Factsheets 2008, 2).

¹³ See http://mediaresearch.orf.at/c_internet/console/blank.htm?c_internet_aim.

¹⁴ The composite index comprises the *web measure index* ranking the ability to deliver online services to citizens, the *telecommunication infrastructure index*, and the *human capital index* which is a composite of the adult literacy rate and the gross enrolment ratio (United Nations 2008, 14pp.).

The existing e-participation offerings from government are still in a developing stage. This is suggested among others by Austria's ranking only 20th in the UN's eParticipation Index 2008 (United Nations 2008, 58). The index "aims to capture the dimensions of government to citizen interaction and inclusion, by assessing the extent to which governments proactively solicit citizen input" by implementing tools supporting e-information, e-consultation and e-decision-making (op. cit., 58). However, as this method only captures e-participation offerings on official government sites, those provided by individual platforms are neglected and can imply a bias towards an underestimation of the total supply.

Earlier examples of citizen participation comprise initiatives like URBAN, an urban development project in Graz¹⁵, the Viennese urban development project EDEN ("Electronic Democracy European Network"¹⁶) or the online platform "klasse:zukunft"¹⁷ operated by the Federal Ministry for Education, Arts and Culture. Especially since 2007 a number of new e-participation projects including several regional initiatives have been launched. Quite a lot of recently launched projects are addressed to young people¹⁸. As most of the projects are still in an initial state there is hardly any data on the number of participants and further socio-demographic characteristics.

A number of e-participation projects have been either triggered by significant recent political decisions and events such as national elections or have earned increased attention along these. For instance, the online platform "meinparlament.at" (My Parliament) started in August 2008. It facilitates direct contacts between citizens and their representatives in parliament. Another site for questions to politicians is "wahltotal.at". A site which allows testing the congruence of oneself's political profile with that of a specific political party is "wahlkabine.at" (Polling Booth). It had already been introduced with the national election in 2002 and has become quite popular meanwhile, attracting over two million individual uses since then. The same function is offered by "politikkabine.at".¹⁹

An investigation on e-participation among youth undertaken by the department of youth policy within the former Ministry of Health, Family and Youth (BMGFJ 2008) provides an overview on some 40 projects. The results are based on a survey carried out between summer 2007 and summer 2008 among institutions working with young people outside schools. The report employs a very wide definition of e-participation covering all sorts of engagement based on ICT: "E-Participation is the engagement of individuals in social, societal, cultural and political-administrative processes of decision-making with the help of ICT" (BMGFJ 2008, 4; translated from German). The projects essentially fall into three categories of e-participation: (1) participation in the creation of websites; (2) in planning of activities for youth; and (3) in discussions of political issues and measures, also beyond the personal life-world of young people. It was found that some projects of the second category also included engaging youth via discussion fora, sometimes leading to quite vivid online interaction. However, this was hardly the case with top-down initiated projects, which seemed to indicate a lack of need for this form of exchange among the target groups as well as deficits in inte-

¹⁵ See <http://www.urban-link.at/>.

¹⁶ See <http://www.wien.gv.at/stadtentwicklung/eu/eden/index.htm>; see also the digital land utilisation plan of the City of Vienna (<http://www.wien.gv.at/flaechenwidmung/public/>), and discussion boards of the City of Vienna (<http://www.wien.gv.at/index/foren.htm>).

¹⁷ See <http://www.klassezukunft.at/>.

¹⁸ Examples are www.salzblog.at initiated by the City of Salzburg, www.cyberjuz.at initiated by the "Landesjugendreferat" of the province of Upper Austria, www.jugendbeteiligung.cc initiated by the "Working Group Participation", www.mitmachen.at initiated by the Federal Data Processing Centre, www.entscheidend-bist-du.at initiated by the Austrian Federal Ministry for Education, Arts and Culture and the Ministry of Science and Research, <http://www.polipedia.at/> initiated by Demokratiezentrum Wien.

¹⁹ See websites <http://www.meinparlament.at/>, <http://wahltotal.at/>, <http://politikkabine.at/>.

grating them in project design. According to the study, projects of the third category gain increasing importance: e.g., discussion fora in connection with youth parliaments, interactions with politicians on youth-specific issues, engaging young people in developing youth policies in their home towns via wikis, and provision of information on elections and political parties, often in combination with games and interactive elements. The study also points out that local level projects prevail and that a large variety of technologies – including html-editors, fora software, content management systems, weblogs, wikis and geo tagging – is employed. An important conclusion is that e-participation offerings targeting young people have to face strong competition from successful web 2.0 sites which makes it especially difficult for top-down initiated projects to attract youth engagement.

A further application area of growing importance is e-participation in environmental issues. A recent study undertaken by order of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Water Management identified a dozen e-participation projects in the environment area in Austria (Heckl 2008). Among others a demand for engagement tools is stimulated by national policies, strategies and programmes such as Austria's Strategy on Sustainable Development or the implementation of the EU directive on establishing a framework for Community action in the field of water policy, which include mandatory participation of various actors. Most of the reported e-participation projects are targeted at the general public, some on the organised public and they include formal as well as informal procedures. The results show that the majority of e-participation cases are initiated by public administration and political institutions; they are mostly invitations to participate in subjects at a strategic level, less often at concrete project levels; the dominating form is consultation and very often discussions among participants are intended as well. It has also been found that the results contributed to opinion formation on behalf of decision-makers; only in some cases these were also implemented in policy decisions. However, in case of non-consideration no justification was provided and evaluations of e-participation were generally missing.

A general problem which has also been pointed out by other scholars is the lacking overview on e-participation possibilities and integrative tools for accessing political information on the Internet (cf. Maier-Rabler/Neumayer 2008, 245). The lack of overview on e-participation offerings is not the only factor impeding electronic public engagement. Barriers to the use of e-government as well as e-participation are connected to socio-demographic factors concerning political participation in general (see section 2.1) and to technology-specific aspects and digital divides in particular. The digital divide in Austria has been discussed as divide between urban and rural areas due to the lack of area-wide broadband access. In the beginning of 2004, one million Austrians living in rural regions were still excluded from broadband access.²⁰ Therefore, the Ministry of Transport, Innovation and Telecommunication launched a broadband initiative in 2003, which has also been supported by similar initiatives at provincial level. In 2007, 46 percent of households had a broadband connection (e-government Factsheets 2008, 2). While the coverage of broadband access in urban and suburban areas was at about 100 percent by the end of 2006, rural areas still only reached coverage of slightly below 80 percent (IDATE 2007, 42).

Another initiative ("eAccessibility") deals with problems concerning people with special needs (e-Government Factsheets 2008, 12). Austria has committed itself to the implementation of guidelines developed by the Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) which envisages that all websites of public administrations are accessible to people with disabilities. In April 2007, the Austrian Federal Chancellery and all Federal Ministries have launched an accessibility survey in order to report on the current situation in this area (Bundeskanzleramt 2007).

²⁰ See <http://www.bmvit.gv.at/telekommunikation/politik/breitband/index.html>.

A topic of research which has to be considered as a separate strand when addressing e-participation is e-voting. It has been a research subject and a field of pilot projects in Austria for already a number of years with proponents in academia, IT industry and politics (Prosser et al. 2007). Starting in 2004, working groups of the Ministry of Internal Affairs particularly discussed legal and technical aspects as well as international developments and experiences. E-voting is not part of the existing electoral law in Austria but it has been applied in specific sectors such as by the Austrian Chamber of Commerce, the Austrian National Students Union and the Board of Listeners and Viewers of the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation. Based on project support by the Ministry of Science and Research, it is planned to employ e-voting for the first time as an option during the next election to the Austrian National Students Union in May 2009.²¹ Recently an online forum has been established in order to initiate an interactive discourse on e-voting in Austria.²²

3 The Austrian policy framework for e-participation

3.1 Actors promoting e-government and e-participation

At the EU-level e-participation is closely interlinked with policy documents on e-government. For instance the “i2010 eGovernment Action Plan” points out the major objective of “[s]trengthening participation and democratic decision-making – demonstrating, by 2010, tools for effective public debate and participation in democratic decision-making” (CEC 2006, 10). In Austria as well the domain of e-government has become a major driver to explore new tools based on ICT also for involving citizens in public debate and decision-making.

The overall coordination of e-government policies and activities lies within the competence of the *Federal Chancellery* in Austria. Since December 2, 2008, State Secretary Josef Ostermayer has been in charge of Austria’s e-government strategy, supported by various technical bodies and administrative units. The *platform “Digitales Österreich”* (Platform Digital Austria) operates as a strategic umbrella of an elaborated organisational structure providing for central coordination across all levels of government. Its top management level is represented by the CIO of Federal Government, the head of the Federal ICT Strategy Unit and the speaker of the Platform. Within this structure the *E-Government Working Group* organises the cooperation of federal, regional and local authorities. It enables federal administration, regions, the Austrian Association of Cities and Towns and the Austrian Association of Municipalities to develop joint solutions for legal, technical and organisational issues. Furthermore, Austria’s e-government strategy is supported by the *E-Government Innovation Centre* (EGIZ), a competence centre that investigates and develops innovative technologies and solutions for e-government.

A number of organisations contribute to implementing e-government and e-participation, respectively. The *Austrian Federal Computing Centre* (“Bundesrechenzentrum – BRZ”) is a state-owned company and major proponent of e-participation (Piswanger 2007). E.g. in 2006, it launched a pilot

²¹ See <http://www.bmwf.gv.at/submenu/evoting/>.

²² See <http://www.onlinewahlen.at/>.

project for the design of electronic participation models. As part of the Austrian eCampaign this so-called “Mitmachen-Move Your Future” project was to promote democratic participation by young people. It is part of the Centre’s “participative E-Government” strategy which, in cooperation with universities, research centres and companies, engages in basic and applied research. Within its e-democracy initiative the BRZ focuses on process management especially in the area of opinion forming, planning, idea finding, and multi-level participation.²³

Box 1: Units responsible for the coordination of Austria’s e-participation strategy at national level (see eGovernment Factsheets 2008, 15pp.)

Coordination of Austria’s e-participation strategy:

- The *Platform “Digitales Österreich”*²⁴ intends to ensure the active and coordinated participation of all government levels as well as of private and public sector bodies. Headed by the Chief Information Officer (CIO) and supported by the ICT Strategy Unit and a public relations officer, its main tasks are strategic decision-making, priority setting regarding the implementation of common e-government projects, their coordination and monitoring and the communication of these activities.
- The *Federal Chief Information Officer*, appointed in 2001, advises the Federal Government in strategic and technical matters and promotes Austrian e-government solutions in the European and international arena.
- The *ICT Strategy Unit*, based in the Federal Chancellery, is responsible for legal and organisational issues, coordination of technical infrastructure, programme and project management, budget controlling and procurement, international issues in the area of e-government and security across all ministries.
- The *Working Group on E-Democracy and E-Participation*, an inter-ministerial and expert forum in the Federal Chancellery, provides fundamentals for the federal administration.²⁵

Other relevant bodies in the realm of e-government/e-participation include the *Data Protection Commission* which is responsible for privacy issues and the *Austrian Court of Audit* which is responsible for the independent financial control of all levels of Austrian government. As regards the introduction of the Austrian Citizen Card (“Bürgerkarte”) which also shall be used for identification and authentication of citizens where required in participation procedures, several organisations are involved: among others the *Secure Information Technology Centre (A-SIT)* is in charge of the introduction of the Citizen Card, the *Chamber of Commerce* and the *Federation of Austrian Social Security Institutions* have implemented signature cards respectively electronic health insurance cards (“eCard”) which are suitable for use as tokens for the Citizen Card function.

Furthermore, the *Austrian Computer Society (OCG)*, a professional association of organisations aiming at the promotion of ICT taking into consideration its impact on society, plays a role in this context. Within its *Forum E-Government*, which brings together representatives of public administration, industry and academia, it has established the *Working Group E-Democracy/E-Voting*²⁶ as an independent platform for discussion and exchange of experience in e-democracy.

²³ See website “E-Democracy” of the Federal Computing Centre:

<http://www.brz.gv.at/Portal.Node/brz/public?genetics.am=PCP&p.contentid=10007.17621>.

²⁴ See <http://www.digitales.oesterreich.gv.at/site/5295/default.aspx>. With its establishment in 2005 the coordination structure for e-government has been consolidated by pooling together the former e-government platform and the ICT Board.

²⁵ See website of the Working Group on E-Democracy and E-Participation:

<http://reference.e-government.gv.at/E-Democracy.981.0.html>.

²⁶ See website of the OCG Working Group E-Democracy/e-Voting:

http://www.ocg.at/egov/e-democracy_evoting.html.

Regarding the level of commitment of political actors to implement new concepts of digital democracy, recent empirical studies shed some light on the current state in Austria suggesting some sceptical view on its prospects. The study of Mahrer and Krimmer (2005) investigated the attitudes and commitments of political actors to e-democracy in Austria. Realising that e-democracy was very often only addressed as a rhetorical promise; they identify barriers in implementing e-democracy initiatives based on existing e-government strategies. Interviews with members of parliament of all political parties in which participants were asked for their personal experience and interpretation of the ongoing e-government discussion showed a high level of scepticism of political actors. Objections against e-democracy were formulated as concerns about unequal conditions, security and privacy issues, and about the potential for manipulation. Furthermore the researchers came to the view that “politicians are very reserved on sharing their true position” (op. cit., 36) on e-democracy. In fact, Mahrer and Krimmer highlight that the vast majority of Austrian politicians is very well informed about different concepts of e-democracy, but that they are very actively opposing it. Pretending that “the ordinary citizen was ‘uninterested’ in politics and ‘unqualified’ to participate” (op. cit.), politicians are found to rather oppose change on different grounds in collective agreement. As the study concludes, various parties have discussed new concepts of enlarged citizen engagement but “the political systems seem to develop a widespread collective and distinctive scepticism concerning these concepts. This scepticism is driven by the fear of a lasting loss of power for the political elite when supporting e-democracy” (op. cit., 38).

A research project carried out by Betz et al. (2006) investigated the Austrian discourse on e-government, the democratic potential of e-government and the hope for enhanced participation of citizens. This study includes an analysis of political and institutional interests, specifically of explicit and implicit intentions behind the promotion of e-government in Austria in the context of the process towards the Austrian E-Government Act 2004. In an article based on this study Bargmann (2006, 113) finds that even though the European Commission points out the aim of e-government to enhance democratic processes and to improve the development and implementation of government policies, this aspect has been neglected in the Austrian political debate. Most of the political parties seem to have delayed this topic to an undefined future point in time; only the Green Party criticised that the chance to include elements of participatory democracy and to develop public information has been passed up.

Contrary to these indications of a neglect of options for public engagement and barriers to its advancement, other activities within Austrian government point towards a supportive attitude. Policy developments at European level were certainly major stimuli for initiatives towards an upgrading of public participation in parts of the Austrian government. In particular, the *Renewed EU Sustainable Development Strategy* (CoEU 2006) stressing involvement of citizens as well as involvement of businesses and social partners as policy guiding principles, together with principles of Good Governance (CEC 2001) had an influence.

The linkage between sustainable development, governance and greater involvement of the civil society has been established in the Austrian Strategy for Sustainable Development of 2002 (cf. Trattnigg 2008). In the same year a *Strategic Group on Participation*²⁷ was set up on the initiative of the Ministry of the Environment and the Austrian Society for Environment and Technology (ÖGUT). The group aims at promoting awareness of participation in the public eye and among decision-makers in politics, public administration and business. It elaborates participation strategies for policies, especially those relevant to the environment and to sustainability. An important recent step was taken with a project by order of the Federal Chancellery and the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Water Management (Trattnigg 2008, 201 pp.): An inter-ministerial working

²⁷ See the website of the “Strategic Group on Participation”: <http://www.partizipation.at/index.php?english>.

group in co-operation with the Austrian chambers, NGOs and external experts elaborated a manual on 'Standards for Public Participation' (Arbter/Trattnigg 2005; Arbter et al. 2007). It provides recommendations for good practice in public participation which are to serve as a practical guide to public administration officials. In July 2008, this manual has been approved by the Council of Ministers.

Finally, there are developments towards some form of e-participation in the context of law-making at the federal parliament (cf. Schebeck 2007). Since a decision in 1999 the federal parliament publishes documents from the evaluation procedure on draft legislation on its website. This first step towards an electronic evaluation procedure on draft bills represents a support of e-participation by the general public and significant improvement of transparency. However, the synopsis of all evaluation comments, which is the basis of the political decision whether a draft bill needs to be modified or not, remains unpublished to date. The parliamentary process of law making has been transformed into a continuous electronic production channel with the E-Law workflow system²⁸, including the promulgation of laws on the Internet; but the pre-parliamentary process of evaluating draft legislation still lacks an electronic consultation environment. Options for extending participation in the legislative process supported by electronic tools are already being studied. They include the question of suitable designs for e-participation in the legislative process, in particular on bills proposed by ministries (Weber 2008) and reflections on political rationales as well as functional requirements of a novel electronic platform for evaluating draft laws (Schebeck 2007, 49pp.).

3.2 Policies on e-participation and e-democracy

As e-participation is a relatively young field in Austrian political practice, concrete policies addressing this topic are just about to be initiated. In June 2008, the above mentioned *Working Group on E-Democracy and E-Participation* within the Federal Chancellery has released a position paper on „E-Democracy & E-Participation in Austria“ (E-DEM 2008) which accomplishes first clarifications on basic definitions and topics like the different forms, potentials and focal points of e-participation as well as questions of its institutional and structural embedding. It provides a set of suggestions and recommendations serving as starting point for developing an e-participation strategy similar to the former process in the field of e-government. According to the position paper, the objective of fostering e-participation is not to install plebiscitary, direct democracy to substitute or even compete with the representative model of democracy (op. cit., 4pp.). The aim is rather to complement representative democracy and to foster civil society participation with regard to the ideal of the interactive state. This movement is seen as an evolutionary transformation from a monolithic state to pluralistic networking with the business sector and civil society. The position paper stresses that in the future there will be “governance webs” which deliver public services and also form political processes.

Classifying the intensity of e-participation, the *Working Group on E-Democracy and E-Participation* differentiates between the levels of (1) information, (2) consultation, and (3) cooperation and co-decision (op. cit., 10pp.). Participation in a narrower sense is stated to refer to forms making use of (at least) two-way communication, i.e. consultation and cooperation on the basis of information. When taking a look at current e-participation initiatives²⁹ it becomes clear that most projects go

²⁸ See http://www.parlament.gv.at/SK/VLESESAAL/PUBLPD/ERECHT/2006-04-18_Publikation-Englisch.pdf.

²⁹ See table of Austrian participation projects in the Federal Chancellery's web portal "Portal:EDem": http://www.ag.bka.gv.at/index.php/E-Participation_Projekte.

beyond merely providing information by offering the possibility to participate via discussion fora, weblogs, and opinion polls. Nevertheless, the projects are hardly connected to actual political participation procedures or concrete decision-making. With regard to the relation between e-participation and offline participation the position paper emphasises that multiple channels of participation and parallel structures are obligatory (op. cit., 18). The Working Group suggests that parallel participation structures and multi-channel strategies are also to be seen as a means to adjust the strong media concentration in Austria.³⁰ Furthermore, e-tools are seen as complementary to formal procedures. Synergies with already existing e-government services shall benefit new developments, as e.g. in the case of the Citizen Card (op. cit., 19pp.).

A major goal of the *Working Group on E-Democracy and E-Participation* is to elaborate an e-democracy strategy for Austria. To this end the working group is contributing over various steps by discussing and drafting components oriented at a layered strategy framework including principles, measures, instruments (tools), test cases and infrastructure elements. The manual on Standards for Public Participation (Arbter et al. 2007) is also relevant in this process but does not directly address engagement supported by new technologies. A source which does focus on e-participation and which is also providing input is the Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to member states on electronic democracy (e-democracy).³¹ This document contains recommendations, principles and guidelines on the implementation of e-democracy and has been elaborated under the Austrian chair of the Ad hoc Committee on e-democracy of the Council of Europe (CAHDE).

National policies such as Austria's Strategy on Sustainable Development or the implementation of the EU directive on establishing a framework for Community action in the field of water policy, include mandatory participation of various actors and point to the potential for support by electronic means. On the other hand the active Government Programme for the period 2008-2013³² contains plans for initiatives in advancing e-government and the chapter on state and administrative reform envisions increased citizen orientation. However, as regards the legal situation in Austria, there are no specific policies setting out citizens' rights in e-participation. A number of relevant legal documents refer to e-participation more generally:

- The *E-Government Act (2004; 2008)* is the legal basis for the instruments used to provide an e-government system and for the closer cooperation between all authorities providing such services. It sets a legal basis for the Citizen Card and electronic signatures which can also become relevant for e-participation.
- The *Electronic Signature Act (2000)* legally recognises electronic signatures satisfying certain security requirements.

³⁰ Regarding the Austrian media system, two topics prevail in public debate: firstly, the endangered independency of the Austrian public broadcasting and secondly and foremost, the high level of press concentration (Seethaler/Melischek 2006, 337). In their "model of media and politics" Hallin and Mancini (2004) denote the Austrian media system as democratic-corporatist model (as opposed to the polarised-pluralist model and the liberal model). Accordingly, the Austrian media system is characterised by high circulation of print media, rising commercialisation, opinion journalism, high political parallelism, extern pluralism, journalistic autonomy and freedom of press, but at the same time strong state intervention and a broadcasting system that is regulated by public law (Seethaler/Melischek 2006, 338). The criticised high press concentration is reflected by a market share of 46.9 percent of the largest Austrian daily newspaper, the "Kronen Zeitung". Austria's four daily newspapers with the highest circulation take a percentage of 76.8 percent (op. cit., 345). A further concentration can be observed regarding weekly and monthly magazines, as most of the high-circulation magazines are published by the "NEWS group" (e.g. News, Profil, E-Media, Format, Trend). In 2001, the "NEWS group" merged with "Mediaprint" which produces the (nationally) widest distributed daily papers "Kronen Zeitung" and "Kurier".

³¹ See adopted text at http://www.bmeia.gv.at/fileadmin/user_upload/bmeia/draft_Reco_as_adopted_08114.pdf.

³² See <http://www.bka.gv.at/DocView.axd?CobId=32965>.

- The *Data Protection Act (2000)* provides for the fundamental right to privacy with respect to the processing of personal data. It includes the right to information, to rectification of incorrect data and to erasure of unlawfully processed data.³³
- The constitutional *Law on Access to Information (1988)* contains provisions on access to public information for the federal and regional levels.
- The *Information Re-Use Act (2005)* regulates the conditions of re-using public sector documents, particularly for the creation of value-added information products and services.
- The *Environmental Information Act (2004)* is the Austrian implementation of *EC Directive 2003/4/EC on the systematic distribution of environmental information*. It stresses that ICTs shall be used intensively for the active distribution of environmental information. In addition, the (still awaited) national implementation of the *Directive 2007/2/EC on establishing an Infrastructure for Spatial Information (INSPIRE)* will further extend the already considerable level of environmental information.

Moreover, various policy documents are related to relevant catalyst or infrastructure functions for the implementation of e-participation: The E-Austria in e-Europe Programme (2002) by the Federal Chancellery is the Austrian equivalent to the European Commission's e-Europe initiative. The Decision on Electronic Law-Making (2001) aimed at facilitating and accelerating Austrian law-making by implementing a completely electronic process for creating legislation; its implementation with the E-Law project includes the official and authentic publication of laws in an online Federal Law Gazette.

During the past ten years, several initiatives have been launched to foster diffusion of and equal access to ICTs. Earlier initiatives are the *Information Society Action Plans* of 1997 and 1998 which started to define a legal framework for the information society and aimed at implementing new public information services; the Information Society Programme addressed the topic of e-democracy for the first time. More recent activities include the Austrian electronic network (AT:net) initiative (2007) supporting the introduction of innovative services and the further diffusion of broadband access, the survey on barrier-free web accessibility (Bundeskanzleramt 2007), and the "Internet Offensive"³⁴, initiated by the Federal Government in 2008.

Also the government initiative "Entscheidend-bist-du" aiming at raising interest in politics and democratic involvement includes measures to increase awareness of e-democracy and the various electronic forms of political engagement. The initiative was launched in 2007 as an accompanying measure of the reduction of the minimum age for participation in elections to the age of 16 and lies in the hands of the Ministry of Science and Research together with the Ministry of Education and Culture.³⁵ For instance, one of the various types of measures within this initiative, a so called DemoLAB, has been explicitly dedicated to e-democracy and involved the Minister of Science of Research in discussion with college students.

Finally, a very recent indication of increased attention to e-participation in public policy concerns the awareness of information barriers mentioned earlier. Up to now there has been no overview on e-participation offerings and citizens lack information on opportunities for engagement in matters of public interest. This barrier is supposed to be reduced as the Federal Chancellery has taken the initiative to explore possibilities of creating an integrative portal for e-participation offerings.

³³ Since the Act is not in conformance with the *Directive 95/46/EC* an infringement procedure has been launched against Austria in 2005.

³⁴ See website "Internetoffensive Österreich": <http://internetoffensive.at/>.

³⁵ See <http://www.entscheidend-bist-du.at/?pg=content2&id=3>.

4 Evaluation of e-participation initiatives

Evaluation is to generate information on results of an e-participation project and its process organisation. The scope can range from very small scale check, addressing a few key evaluation questions, to a large scale evaluation study based on a detailed evaluation framework. In any case evaluation involves a systematic comparison of results with predefined criteria, performance standards or expectations. How comprehensive an evaluation should be and whether the focus is on outcomes (summative evaluation) or on process aspects (formative evaluation), depends above all on the evaluation purposes and motivations for such an activity. These can be quite varied but the most important interests for undertaking an evaluation of e-participation are organisational learning, management enhancement, audit and project control, assessment of tools, and, last but not least, enhancing democracy.

Even though one can find several empirical assessments of singular Austrian e-participation projects, there is still a lack of systematic evaluation (for first approaches see Aichholzer/Kozeluh 2007; Winkler 2007; Aichholzer/Allhutter 2008).

A partial evaluation of an individual project has been undertaken in the case of “mitmachen.at”, one of the largest e-participation projects for deliberation on policy measures among young people to date (Krimmer et al. 2007). According to the project board’s evaluation summary, the applied four step process tool principally proofed to be appropriate since it led to a kind of “small government programme” as a tangible result and the interest among the target group was satisfactory. However, it was found that the top-down approach applied would have needed to be complemented by stronger bottom-up elements. To make full use of a supporting semantic analysis tool would have required a four times higher number of contributions. This appraisal seems to indicate a problem shared with other top-down initiated e-participation pilots, i.e. that participation numbers were quite modest. Summarising the results on this e-participation case, Edelmann et al. (2008) point out that it has shown an interest in online deliberation and use of this method by young people; that it has made clear that their criticism and feedback must be taken seriously and used for improving the online-services; and that additional efforts are necessary to motivate people to take an interest in political and civic issues.

First steps to introduce a common classification for e-participation projects have also been taken by the *Working Group on E-Democracy and E-Participation*, which provides basic classification criteria as well as descriptive and normative indicators for evaluation (E-DEM 2008, 7pp.). According to this classification the following aspects should be taken into account:

- area (public service, policy-making)
- levels (local, regional, national, supranational)
- actors (initiative, execution, target groups)
- method and form of participation
- technology and media (mobile services, digital TV, web services)
- direction of activity:
 - top-down processes: initiated by politicians or administration (e.g. E-Polling, E-Plebiscite, E-Consultation)
 - bottom-up processes: informal participation in a wider sense (e.g. E-Lobbying, E-Protest, E-Mobilisation, E-Petition)
- participation in the three state-functions (legislation, administration, jurisdiction)
- intensity (information, consultation, cooperation)

- level of binding character (level of institutionalisation of participation procedures (formal, informal procedure; compulsory); integration in existing structures and impact (policies such as strategies, programmes, projects; law-making)
- fit of e-participation within policy process (point in time of inclusion of interest groups or the public into the policy process)

Evaluation is also one of the elements to be integrated into the e-democracy strategy being drafted by the Working Group on E-Democracy and E-Participation. This underlines the attention paid to this issue in public policy on e-participation.

5 Conclusion

This paper was a first step to assess the status of e-participation within the political system in Austria, taking a top-down perspective focusing on the policy framework related to citizens' rights in the digital environment, the role of public participation and public policies on e-participation. Far from providing a complete and final evaluation, it intended to offer a tentative assessment of relevant developments regarding e-participation in Austria and has to be followed by further, more comprehensive and thorough analyses.

A major outcome is that citizen participation and e-participation in particular have been playing a marginal role within the Austrian political system for long; but both public participation as such and participation in electronic ways seem to be gaining increased importance in public policies in more recent years. The enhancement of public participation by principles of good governance and in policy documents such as the Austrian Strategy for Sustainable Development of 2002, the establishment of a Strategic Group on Participation with support by the Ministry of the Environment, the approval of 'Standards for Public Participation' by the Council of Ministers in 2008 and a recent government initiative aimed at enhancing interest in politics and participation among young people are signs that participation plays an increasing role for government. At the same time this does not mean that e-participation and citizen engagement are promoted throughout government as research has also shown rejection of citizen participation by politicians and public administration officials.

While Austria's political institutions have been laggards in experimenting with and adopting e-participation, there are a number of recent initiatives and projects, particularly in the field of youth participation and participation in environmental issues. Institutional actors actively dealing with e-participation and promoting it, respectively, include those responsible for e-government around the Federal Chancellery, the Federal Computing Centre, and ministries such as those for Agriculture and Environment, Education and Culture, Science and Research. The task of a Working Group on E-Democracy and E-Participation at the Federal Chancellery to draft an e-democracy strategy for Austria is another clear indicator that e-participation has become a subject of public policies in Austria. However, it has to be noted that the recent upswing of supportive initiatives for public participation and e-participation go together with ambivalent attitudes among politicians and administration towards e-participation. Given the initial state of e-participation initiatives in Austria, a systematic evaluation of results and consequences has not yet been conducted. From available evidence only first trends and some lessons can be outlined. For instance, for top-down initiated projects it is a special challenge to attract larger numbers of participants. At what pace, in which

direction e-participation will develop and which functions to which extent it will fulfil, e.g. regarding two poles such as instilling democracy through greater citizen empowerment or keeping the growing potential of elite-challenging citizen activities within the limits of representative democracy through greater acquiescence with government policies, is still open. Currently, experimenting, testing and learning still seem to be in the foreground.

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